

### HOW SHAKESPEARE USES THE SUPERNATURAL.

Much difference of opinion has been expressed upon the comedy of "Mid-summer Night's Dream." Some critics affirm that it was amongst Shakespeare's earliest works, and therefore stamped with the imperfections and inexperience of youth; others maintain that of all his comedies there are none more harmonious. The incidents and characters, though abundant, appear to be in perfect subordination to the master-mind of the poet, the main attribute being, that "under the supernatural influence human mortals move according to their respective natures and habits." The characters of the play are classical, but the costume is strictly Gothic, and shows that Shakespeare attained his knowledge through the medium of romance. The qualities of Puck or Robin Goodfellow were evidently collected from the popular superstitions of the writer's own time. "Oberon," king of the fairies, seems, however, to be an adaptation, as it is to be found in Green's "James IV." "The Man in the Moon" (Scene I.) was a personage of some consequence in Shakespeare's day; and is even now regarded with some little (suspicion by the ignorant and young. "Mid-summer Night's Dream" is wild and fantastical; but the parts are well-balanced, and succeed in giving that amount of pleasure to the reader which the writer apparently intended to impart. To enter upon a minute or even cursory survey of the supernatural characters in this comedy would be a task of considerable magnitude, and criticism thereof mere presumption; reference, therefore, to one or two of the more prominent figures may suffice. "Puck," like Ceres in "The Tempest," is the Commander-in-Chief of the fairy forces—a busy-body—ringleader in all disturbances—ready for any game—continually about mischief. He pours skim-milk into the churn, thereby giving the house-wife needless labor, and depriving her of butter; prevents the fermentation of the beer, and so cheats the "drouths" out of a good "top"; misleads night-wanderers "laughing at their harm"; jests Oberon, and makes him smile; beguiles the horses by neighing like a filly-foal. Puck has more comprehensive ideas than these. He says:

"I'll put a girdle round about the earth  
In forty minutes."

Oberon and Titania, as becometh their high position, are inclined to be rather more dignified in their demeanour than Puck. Oberon says:

"We are spirits of another sort."

But Shakespeare endows them also with powers of expression. Titania thus describes, in a few artistic lines, the immutability of nature:

"The seasons alter; hoary-headed frosts  
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose;  
And on old Hymen's chin and icy crown,  
An odorous chaplet of sweet Summer buds,  
Is, as in mockery, set; the Spring, the Summer,  
The chilling Autumn, angry Winter, change  
Their wonted liveries; and the 'mazed worlds,  
By their increase, now knows not which is which."

Oberon, on the other hand, is represented as giving utterance to those beautiful lines:

"I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows,  
Where ox-lips and the nodding violet grows;"

which form the theme of one of our best modern songs.

Perhaps, however, no finer description of the antics of the dwellers in fairy-land, and their more prodigious brethren, who inhabit other supernatural spheres, played upon the less-favoured creatures of this world, can be given than that contained in the closing scene of the play, where Puck, Oberon, and Titania are the speakers. It runs thus:

[Enter Puck.]

"Now the hungry lion roars,  
And the wolf behowls the moon;  
Whilst the heavy ploughman snores,  
All with weary task fordone,  
Now the wasted brands do glow,  
Whilst the screech-owl, screeching loud,  
Puts the wretch that lies in woe,  
In remembrance of a shroud.  
Now it is the time of night,  
That the graves, all gaping wide,  
Every one lets forth his sprite  
In the church-way paths to glide;  
And we fairies that do run  
By the triple Hecate's team,  
From the presence of the sun  
Following darkness like a dream;  
Now are frolics; not a mouse  
Shall disturb this hallow'd house;  
I am sent with broom before,  
To sweep the dust behind the door,

[Enter Oberon and Titania, with their train.]

Oberon.—Though the house give gleaming light,  
By the dead and drowsy fire;  
Every elf and fairy sprite  
Hop as light as bird from brier;  
And this ditty after me  
Sing and dance it trippingly.

Tita.—First, rehearse your song by rote,  
To each word a warbling note:  
Hand in hand, with fairy grace,  
Will we sing, and bless this place.  
&c., &c., &c.

Peas-Blossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustard-Seed have no specified place in this play. Probably one of these is the "Fairy," introduced into Act II., Scene I., or it may be that they are honoured with a place in the list of the *dramatis personae* from having a position in the royal household.

As Shakespeare does not here enumerate *in toto* the members of the fairy court, the following list given by Poole, in his "English Parnassus" may not be uninteresting: "Oberon is the Emperor; Mab, the Empress; Perriwiggam, Perriwinkle, Puck, Hobgoblin, Tomalin, Tom Thumb, are the courtiers; Hop, Mop, Drop, Pip, Trip, Skip Tub, Tib, Trick, Pink, Gill, Inn, Tit, Warp, Win, Wit, the maids of honour; Nymphidia is mother of the maids."

We have thus shortly dealt with some of the supernatural characters Shakespeare makes use of in his plays. A master-mind, he unfolds the many-sided passions of men. Hatred, love, fear and reverence are set before us in vivid characters. He has also portrayed in bodily form those "airy nothings" which perplexed the minds of the ignorant and superstitious of his own time. His creations are universally admired; painter and poet have striven to re-produce them with varied success; and the world this day still rings with the plaudits of his admirers.